The Place of Ceremonies in the Spiritual Life

Being the substance of two Sermons preached at the Church of St. Michael and All Angels, Huizen, Holland, on 28th August and 4th September, 1927

By

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LIBERAL CATHOLIC CHURCH
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SINCE the Liberal Catholic Church began its work, it has evoked a good deal of discussion as to what value and worth are to be attached to religious ceremonies. Undoubtedly there are large numbers of people who are out of sympathy with existing religious institutions. Popular journalists and people eminent in the ranks of society or in various branches of public achievement have taken to broadcasting their views on religion in the Sunday press; and they mostly lean to the idea that religion in its essence consists of the Sermon on the Mount. It is constantly asked: "What has true religion to do with forms and ceremonies? Is it not rather a matter of the free soaring of the Spirit, untrammelled by dogmas and rites and by formalism of any sort whatsoever?" "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John iv., 24). "Do we not bewilder and confuse people by our elaborate theories on spiritual matters; does not all true spirituality make towards simplicity and freedom from artificial bonds and restrictions?"

Needless to say, these views represent a conception of things which has much of reality and truth behind it, and because of that they commend themselves to many people. Their validity need not be disputed, but we do need to see to what stage of the Spiritual Life they apply and exactly where they fit in and belong in the domain of religion.

Unfortunately, people who discuss religion often do not take the trouble to give to it the same thorough

and all-round study that they do devote to the mastery of any other science. The sciences are understood to involve study and training for their acquisition, but religion—the science of ultimate things—is the one upon which the man-in-the-street so often considers himself competent to speak without any preliminary training. In place of this study, for which abundant material exists, people seem to think that in religion we are concerned simply with how they feel about things, and so their vague sentiment is made to pass muster as an opinion of value and authority. The fact is: religion covers so wide a field of thought and effort that its understanding demands a good deal of deep thinking, and requires that in many aspects of the question we shall discriminate and not confuse issues which are separate and distinct.

The Purpose of Religion.

If we are to bring order into our thinking on the subject of religion we need at the outset to understand what religion is and what duty and function it has to perform. We often get a good basis for broad generalisation on such subjects by taking a little excursion into the etymology of the words we use. In this case, the most generally accepted derivation of the word is from the Latin word *religare*, meaning to bind back. (Some derive it from *relegere*, which carries the similar sense of "going over again" or "sailing back over the same waters.") Hence religion is that factor in our lives which binds us back to the Source of our being, to God, or to the Individual Monad, from Whom we derive our existence. We need not elaborate the point here. The Gnostic Bardesan saw in a parable akin to that of the Prodigal Son an allegory of humanity in its state of pilgrimage, lost at first in ignorance and in the darkness of

materiality, and finally seeking the Father's home (c.f. *The Hymn of the Soul*).

Why Religion Cannot be Simple.

We need to understand, first of all, that there are different spheres or departments of religion, all of which have their share to contribute in the helping of humanity. Religion cannot be the simple affair that idealists would like to have it be, because humanity—individually and collectively—is so complex; and religion is intended for humanity. Religion has to be operative at all levels and in all departments of our being. Hygiene, in so far as it makes for the well-being of our physical bodies, is a department of religion. To be hale is to be whole, that is, in a state of physical healthiness and of at-one-ment with the remainder of one's self. Social activities which make for the physical and moral well-being of the race are a part of religion. Yet hygiene and political economy are complicated and difficult sciences, involving theories which are abstruse or difficult of comprehension; and this aspect of religion—incontestably **true** religion!—does not at first glance seem to have much in common with the "free soaring of the Spirit" or the elimination of theories and systems. System and theory of the right sort, in fact, are of its essence. Transcendental ideas relating to the mystic union of the soul with God belong to another department of religion, and we should avoid confusing the issues by supposing that all branches of religion are concerned with this kind of thought.

The human being, furthermore, finds himself endowed with emotions and the ability to think. The training of this emotion and thought towards higher things is part of the work of religion. It is no common-sense to ignore the mind and say that it has nothing to do with religion. We exaggerate the importance of some aspects of mental activity in these

days and sometimes we still tend to deify reason, but the remedy is not to cast off the mind and all its works, but to purify and raise it until it becomes illumined and permeated by the Intuitional Reason. I have heard people boast that they never read books. Obviously a nice discrimination in the choice of reading is to be commended, but to pretend that one can afford to ignore the accumulated knowledge and experience of others is sheer silliness. In the case of a street accident, for example, the superiority of one who has taken the trouble to learn "First Aid" is so obvious that the subject simply does not lend itself to discussion.

From all this emerges the reflection that since man himself is an exceedingly complicated being, so also the religion which seeks to train and minister to the many-sided activities of his consciousness cannot escape from being likewise a complex and many-sided affair. One has only to think of the many lives in which we have been working and gathering experiences in the past to realise "what a wonderful piece of work is man." And when it is understood that religion is confronted with the task of providing not only for a single one of these complicated individuals who have been wandering through innumerable incarnations, but for masses of them in the aggregate, one sees that as a practical proposition religion cannot be the simple affair that people would have it be, if it is to do its work and minister to the highly varied types and temperaments of humanity. It has to deal with many sides of man's nature and with the many-sided nature of many differently-made men.

The Question of Ceremonies: A Discrimination.

Much of the objection that is made against rites and ceremonies arises from misunderstanding of what they are intended to accomplish. There are two sides to the work of the Church. On the one hand, it is

intended to minister to the spiritual development of its members as individuals. It does this in a variety of ways, into which we need not enter here—by religious and moral instruction, by methods of prayer and meditation, by the training in good works. On the other hand, a Church is intended to be a centre of spiritual influence for the helping of the world at large. Its public services, when rightly understood, are intended more for this purpose than for the helping of the individual, though the individual may derive much help from them. It is obvious that the man-in-the-street knows absolutely nothing of all this side of the work, and he is certain therefore to have erroneous and confused ideas on the subject. A ceremony which is intended to group a mass of people together for the purpose of sending out a great flood of thought influence on the outside world will naturally be quite a different thing from the exercises in meditation which may be given to one who has in view some purpose connected with his own inner development. People who have to be grouped together for a given work have necessarily to be subjected to a discipline—which means, of course, limitation in a form. They submit themselves, gladly and freely, to the conditions which are found best for the work in view. "Nature is conquered by obedience."

To contrast this collective work with "the free soaring of the Spirit, untrammelled by limitations" is foolish, and betrays a want of understanding of the situation. Let me repeat again, that religion has many different departments of work. We saw just now that hygiene and political economy are two of these departments. The raising and stimulating of the thought and feeling and spiritual faculties of the outside world is another of these departments of work, and its methods and requirements ought not to be confused with those appertaining to the department of mystical experience. Difficulties need not arise if

only people will not confuse issues which are separate and distinct.

Objections to Ceremonial: Materialistic.

The objections that are made against rites and ceremonies can be grouped under two headings, needing separate treatment. Under the first we can combine all those which speak of religious ceremonies as being meaningless or superstitious, or as "putting the clock backwards."

I do not intend to deal here with the first group of objections; it does not really belong to our subject. Neither the ceremonies of the Church nor those of Freemasonry can be understood without the aid of the Theosophical teachings. For the ceremonies of both these systems are designed to affect the man as a whole, and not simply that part of him which lives on the physical plane. When it is understood that man is a Spiritual Intelligence, Divine in essence, and that there are higher worlds of being in which he is living contemporaneously with his physical existence, the perspective of the problem changes. These ceremonies are not planned from a standpoint which sees the physical plane as the one reality; but they take into account the superphysical worlds, and the working of natural forces in those worlds. And their aim is to lift us up into conscious communion with our Higher Self, and thus to make possible the recovery of the "Lost Word," the "Great Secret" of the Divinity hidden in the human heart. I do not propose to deal further with this side of our subject, as I have already said; but those who are interested can study this new outlook on religion in Bishop Leadbeater's great work, *The Science of the Sacraments*.

Buddhistic Objections.

The second class of objections to ceremonial to which I referred are of quite a different order, and

take their source in certain traditions of Buddhism. I remember speaking some twenty years ago on this very subject with Ananda Metteya, a Scotsman by birth who belonged to a group of Buddhist monks in Burma. He then told me that attention to all phenomenal manifestations, whether to psychic faculties or to rites and ceremonies, was in the nature of a divagation from the direct way to Nirvana. They were not in themselves wrong, but they were like dallying by the roadside.

There was much discussion on the question some years ago in the Theosophical Society when the ceremonial movement, which has now grown so strong, began to develop. And as there are periodical recurrences of the same questioning, I propose that we should deal with the matter in some detail. In the earlier days the teaching that dependence on rites and ceremonies was one of the fetters to be cast off at the stage between the first and second of the Great Initiations was apt to be misunderstood. It was supposed that all use of ceremonies was condemned. It may not be out of place to quote the words employed in the earlier books. In *The Path of Discipleship* Mrs. Besant speaks of the last of the three fetters that have to be cast off at this stage as superstition. She says: ". . . . it means the reliance on external, sectarian rites for spiritual help. . . . The man has risen above exoteric forms and ceremonies" (page 87).

C. W. Leadbeater says in *Invisible Helpers*:

"The third fetter to be got rid of comprehends all kinds of unreasoning or mistaken belief, all dependence on the efficacy of outward rites and ceremonies to purify the heart. He who would cast it off must learn to depend upon himself alone, not upon others, nor upon the husk of any religion" (pages 116-7).

At a later date came Alcyone's *At the Feet of the Master*, which said:

"You must feel perfect tolerance for all, and a hearty interest in the beliefs of those of another religion, just as much as in your own. For their religion is a path to the highest, just as yours is. . . . . You must . . . . be free from bigotry and superstition. You must learn that no ceremonies are necessary; else you will think yourself somehow better than those who do not perform them. Yet you must not condemn others who still cling to their ceremonies" (pages 46-7).

It is clear from a close study of the above passages that what is treated as undesirable is **dependence** upon outer rites and ceremonies, and the idea that their use can replace individual effort. As is well known, these instructions of the Brotherhood are based upon the teaching of the Lord Buddha, and we shall better understand the whole situation if we put ourselves back into the circumstances under which He promulgated them. It was a German historian, Leopold von Ranke, who introduced what are called the exact methods of historical criticism, which insist upon the idea that events in history cannot be judged in the setting of modern conditions into which most people are liable to place them, but have to be viewed amid the circumstances under which they occurred. The Lord Buddha came out into India at a time when Hinduism was greatly overburdened with rites and ceremonies. Probably many of them had already in His time become changed and distorted. That is still the state of affairs to-day, and one often finds the letter of the law observed in entire defiance of its spirit. People are told to wash the cloth which forms their raiment before entering the Temple, but the water of the tanks which are provided in the Temple precincts for that purpose may be green with the slime of ages.

Hence we can quite well understand that part of His mission was to discourage the idea that the mere performance of these ceremonies could in itself achieve liberation for those who performed them. We have an excellent illustration of what is meant in the naïve use of the prayer-wheel among the Tibetans. The continual spinning of a wheel engraved with certain prayers replaces the utterance of the prayers by the worshipper.

The stress which the Lord Buddha laid upon one aspect of truth at a certain period of the world's history and amid special conditions does not necessarily apply with equal force to another period and set of conditions. Anyhow, when His great Successor founded the Christian faith He chose to institute within it certain rites which have been the well-spring of its life through the centuries that have since elapsed.

Our Attitude.

What bearing has all this on our Liberal Catholic Church and its work? I do not think that any of us is dependent upon the ceremonies that we do, or looks to them as an end in themselves. Even if we were so, it is worth noting that such dependence is an obstacle that has to be surmounted only as we are preparing to take the second of the Great Initiations. There need be, for most of us, no burning hurry to disembarrass ourselves of ceremonies!

You all know how in the training through which we pass in this particular Church at Huizen we try to make self-disinterestedness the foundation of all our work. People are for the most part wrapped up in their own ideas and in the pursuit of their own likes and pleasures. The first step in our training here is to teach people to turn outwards, and to learn to take more interest in other people and in great world movements and events than in their separated personal attach-

ments. And so it has always been an understood thing in this Church that people come here not primarily for their own spiritual benefit, but to join in an act of service for the helping of the outside world. We believe that every time the Holy Eucharist is celebrated great spiritual forces are sent out over the world around, which operate to change the thought atmosphere of the neighbourhood, and to give a spiritual stimulus to all who come within the sweep of this outpouring. Many people who never come to a Church are thus helped, and receive from time to time some impetus in their spiritual growth. If you study closely one of our services, in which every person present in Church is encouraged to express himself as earnestly and at as high a level of aspiration as he can reach, you will realise that for a protracted period of time you have a number of people in a state of great concentration, working at a level of thought and feeling that they seldom touch at other times, and that other people seldom touch at all, unless indeed they are working along parallel lines. When you add to this the blessing of Our Lord that flows through the Sacraments and all the spiritual help from other sources, it will be realised how magnificent this outpouring may be. The quality of thought and of emotion is so much more elevated than the ordinary thinking and feeling of the outer world, that with its greater potency and having a clear and uninterrupted field of action, it really can do much to melt away the hatred and distrust and unhappiness all too prevalent in the world. On this point, again, I have no time to dwell. But that is the attitude in which we in this Church work. To tell those who are working in this purposeful attitude to "throw away their crutches" seems hardly a counsel of understanding.

To use ceremonies as a means of working for other people is quite a different thing from being dependent upon them. A business man may find it convenient

to use an automobile or a stenographer in order to economise time and strength. These things are instruments that he purposely uses, and nobody is so foolish as to ask why he has not outgrown them. A spiritual teacher may use the printing press to disseminate his ideas. It does not occur to us to tell him that spirituality is concerned with "the free soaring of the Spirit" or with "the heavenly marriage of the soul" rather than with printing presses. We have the good sense to see that the two things belong to different orders of thought and to different departments of the work, and the printing press may enable him to reach people in larger numbers.

Let me finally point out, in this connection, that however much we may profess to have outgrown ceremonies, we cannot really escape from them. The manifestation of God in His world implies the fundamental duality of Spirit and Matter, or Life and Form. Ceremony is the science of form. Our bodily movements throughout the day are one long ceremonial. There is an elaborate process of eating, of dressing, of locomotion, and our relations with one another all require self-expression through form. The Quaker who objects to forms and ceremonies only substitutes his own simpler, and perhaps, therefore, less effective, set of forms for those he disapproves of in others. In fact, it will generally be found that people who inveigh against these things really mean that they dislike the forms that other people employ (generally because they have not studied or tried to understand them), but are quite prepared to substitute others of their own making and within the measure of their comprehension in their stead.

"The religion of the Spirit" is an attractive and captivating phrase. But the religion that the Spirit would impart and the religion that the man-in-the-street can receive are poles apart. St. Paul, when he speaks of the gifts of the Spirit, emphasises the diver-

sity of their distribution among men. One has the gift of wisdom, another of healing, another of the discerning of spirits, another of the interpretation of tongues. Not any one has them in their plenitude and entirety. Religion has to deal with people as they are—much enveloped in the world of form. Before one can occupy oneself with a religion that appertains to the realm of pure Spirit, one must have accomplished a long and strenuous ascent through the realms of matter.

Ceremonies not Necessary to Salvation, but Useful.

There is, of course, a sense in which the value of religious rites may be exaggerated. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, teaches that the Sacraments are necessary for the salvation of mankind,* and the Church of England in her *Catechism* speaks of two, Baptism and the Supper of the Lord, as being "generally necessary to salvation." Hence the Church was regarded as the ark of salvation, and in mediæval times churches were sometimes built in the form of an ark, with the walls sloping outwards, symbolizing the belief that as the ark of Noah saved its occupants from the waters of the Great Flood, so salvation was to be found only within the shelter of the Church.

This is one of the points on which most members of the Liberal Catholic Church would find themselves unable to follow the teaching of the older Churches. We do not believe that Baptism is actually "necessary to salvation." We believe that the world is the theatre of an ordered Plan, and that humanity achieves Salvation, Nirvana, Liberation, Fulfilment—whatever word one likes to use—through the cosmic processes. No particular Church and no particular religion is necessary to this, though it may be questioned whether a man could entirely dispense with "religion" in the

*Though not all of them for every person, *e.g.*, Holy Order and Matrimony.

broad and general sense of the term. But Churches and religions may be of great help in the accomplishment of this process. We say, therefore, in our own particular orbit of work, that the Sacraments, while not necessary to salvation, are extraordinarily useful.

What We Really Believe.

I should be conveying a false impression if I did not add that while we do not regard the rites of the Church as "necessary to salvation," we feel that we have still untold riches of spiritual experience to gain from the Church. Let me ask you to consider with me what the Church offers to us. Why do we celebrate the Holy Eucharist? We do so because Our Lord Himself said to His Apostles and their successors: "Do this in remembrance of Me." We can picture how the Disciples were sad and perplexed as on the eve of His Passion He told them of His impending departure. And we can see Him breaking the Bread and blessing the Cup as He told them that He was bequeathing to them a rite which should keep His Presence perpetually among them and help them to maintain that unity and sense of fellowship which they had found in their common devotion to Him. "As oft as men shall do these things," He said—if we may slightly paraphrase the utterance—"they shall do them in remembrance of Me." How wonderful the gift that He has left to us only those know who day after day seek Him in the silence and peace of their hearts. How exquisite the thought that by His incorporation in ourselves and the merging of our consciousness into Him, we grow more and more like unto Him Who is our Sun of Righteousness, the very Life and Nectar of our being.

People often fail to realise what is involved in the doctrine of the Unity of Life. It means that the whole of creation is interdependent, linked together in one chain of being. And as we help those who stand

below us on the ladder of evolution (so that the domesticated animals, for example, owe their progress to our association with them), so are we in turn helped by those who stand above us. It is part of the scheme that Those who remain on earth to help forward struggling humanity by Their very sacrifice gain the mighty power that They can use in that work. To refuse to profit by Their blessing, from a mistaken idea of spiritual independence, is to deny the unity of the One Life. This is the truth which lies behind the old theological idea of the "free gift of grace." Because of this unity of life, the Elder Brothers of the race can pour out upon us blessing altogether surpassing in measure that which we can earn or merit for ourselves. It is through this law that Our Lord, as the "first among many brethren," can give us His Divine Life through the Sacraments that He instituted for this purpose.

The student will be familiar with the idea that all rightly designed ceremonies are in the nature of allegory, and in terms of physical action re-present the Divine drama of the heavenly worlds. In the symbolism of the Eucharist, as so magnificently outlined for us by Bishop C. W. Leadbeater, we have a picture of the descent of the Second Aspect of the Deity into matter, of His glorious Resurrection and His triumphant Ascension. And since in that sublime Mystery we not merely commemorate the heavenly processes so pourtrayed, but verily take part in them and re-enact them, so is it given to us to work with what degree of self-awareness we can attain in those processes of the higher worlds in which the Spirit of man has his place of dwelling. Let me put what I mean for you in language that is clear and unambiguous. Bishop Leadbeater describes for us as part of the celebration of the Eucharist an activity taking place at those levels of consciousness which we qualify with the technical names of atmic, buddhic,

causal, etc. The blessing which comes with the consecration of the Host and the subsequent movement of the rite, is strongest at the buddhic level. Part of the action takes place at the atmic level, and much again at the causal. It is at this last that we are able to respond best, because of our present lack of development of the higher vehicles of consciousness. Do you not see the possibilities which lie before you in the unfolding and exercise of the powers of your higher consciousness, and how foolish it is to talk of "outgrowing" the Eucharist until you are as much at home in those higher worlds and in the consciousness of Our Great Lord as you are at present in this physical world of shadows that we consider real?

People sometimes think the Eucharist complicated. Of course, it is. But think what a great achievement so to arrange the material objects of earth and to compass the forces of heaven that Our Lord is physically incarnate with us. How could so mighty an achievement be wrought otherwise than with difficulty and elaboration? And yet in the sense of His Presence all becomes simple and elemental. Forms no longer bind; they have served their glorious purpose; and we soar aloft in the freedom of the spirit into the Everlasting Arms of His Love, there to know that we are one with all that lives and moves.

A great spiritual teacher comes but rarely into the world. He can accomplish marvels simply by the magic of his presence. It all seems so simple, so easy. But he is not simple. He is the product of many lives and of innumerable experiences in the past. He can do what he sets himself to do with ease and freedom because of long experience from the past. Such teachers are rare, the efflorescence of an age. In His Church we compress the elaboration of many lives into one great ceremonial act, and lo! He is with us upon a thousand altars daily and the whole world is blessed by His Presence.

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